

Drawn City: the effects of women's graffiti in public spaces of Rio and Barcelona through cartography

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Abstract

There are manifestations of graffiti in various places throughout the contemporary city. The drawings created by female graffiti artists can present different themes as a means of the consolidation of identities. However, does graffiti made by a woman symbolically influence public space? Focusing on the neighbourhoods of Santo Cristo in Rio de Janeiro and Poblenou with Provençals del Poblenou in Barcelona, this article proposes a methodological reflection on how to identify these actions and understand their cultural effects in a global phenomenon. In order to comprehend the impacts of these graphic expressions, a methodology based on a cartography was developed. Mapping graffiti created by women can be carried out in other cities and asserts the female presence as part of the occupation of public space.

Keywords: urban cultures, street art, cultural landscapes, critical cartography, right to the city

Introduction

The contemporary city presents layers of everyday graphic interventions carried out by different agents through multiple forms of expression. The urban landscape is in constant transformation, shaped by the creative and communicative capacities of citizens through their drawings and writings. In this context, urban public spaces are regarded as platforms for the expression of various groups, ranging from institutional organisations to popular forms such as graffiti. Graffiti raises questions about hegemonic power and brings artistic expression to the urban fabric; for this reason, it is relevant to the consolidation of identities and reinforces people's sense of belonging.

However, the artistic movement is predominantly male and female graffiti artists face difficulties in being accepted and have few records (Pabón-Colón, 2018), raising the question: why do female graffiti artists not receive the same visibility as their male counterparts? Authors such as Silvia Federici (2017) argue that realities like these reflect the social pressures of the patriarchal capitalist system¹. According to Federici, the transition from the feudal system to capitalism caused a reconfiguration of power relations: to maintain power for men and in an attempt to compensate for the expropriated lands, women began to be treated as property under the imposition of social roles. Even so, this oppressive structure of objectification of women was not uncontested.

This history also includes women's struggles for the right to the city (Lefebvre, 2016). Some creative initiatives of place appropriation provide new perspectives on inhabiting cities based on women's own lived experiences. In this way, despite obstacles, they participate in urban development (Muxí, 2019) and in shaping the image of a place.

Given this context, it is necessary to identify where the interventions are located and what their messages are in order to understand the symbolic effects of graffiti on the landscape. Considering these issues, it is worth asking: can graffiti created by a woman transform the landscape of a city? To reflect on this question, this article focuses on analysing the impacts on public space caused by graffiti created by women.

The research employs critical cartography as a tool to understand the graphic-symbolic effects of graffiti as a global phenomenon with local specificities. Furthermore, it aims to develop a reproducible methodology for graffiti studies applicable in different cities to advance theoretical and methodological frameworks. Through an interdisciplinary approach combining Urban Planning, History of Art, Design and Geography, the study also seeks to reflect on the hypothesis that urban voids in a city are the spaces most sought after by female graffiti artists

1 Silvia Federici's (2017) study focuses on the period of the Middle Ages in Western Europe.

in pursuit of freedom of expression.

Focusing on urban voids, the research seeks to compare the Santo Cristo neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) with Poblenou and Provençals del Poblenou² in Barcelona (Catalunya, Spain). These locations are recognised for their significance in graffiti history, offering an opportunity to build international networks. The neighbourhoods share similarities as they are currently experiencing predatory real estate development, resulting in fenced-off plots featuring interventions by female graffiti artists.

In order to analyse graffiti interventions made by women in these places in 2024, this article proposes a reflection on the methodology based on cartographic production. Cartography is a way to highlight artistic diversity in public space, showing how female graffiti artists form part of the cultural landscape and enabling the discovery of new graphic representations of the city.

Drawing as a Tool for Urban and Human Transformation

Historically, graffiti is considered a cultural movement in the United States and its purpose “is primarily an invitation to encounter and dialogue” (Gitahy, 2012, p. 16). The initiative originated from young black and Latino Americans living in the suburbs, who saw artistic expression as a way to denounce public authorities’ neglect through codes and provocations in public spaces. The U.S. core of the artistic movement gained strength in the 1980s, consolidating its relationship with Hip Hop through initiatives in drawing, music and dance. In the same decade, the style spread internationally, sparked political clashes³, was appropriated by art galleries⁴ and challenged urban art (street art), which proposes focusing more on the end result on the street over the cultural process.

Although graffiti has gained acceptance among young people worldwide, Jessica Pabón-Colón (2018) points to the relative erasure of women in these narratives. The author states that female graffiti artists have existed from the beginning, with participants such as Eva62, Barbara62, Kivu 181, Lady Pink, and others, but records have predominantly focused on men. Challenging this situation, the increase in the number of women involved in graffiti was noted in the 1990s and expanded in the 2000s due to digital media. The female presence brought some changes to the style. They managed to form more collectives, introduce their perspectives in debates, magazines and studies to encourage other women in graffiti (Amorim, 2022).

Similarly, women’s struggle for greater prominence is evident in other fields, as Urban Planning. Authors like Zaida Muxí (2019) share their professional experiences in municipal organisation to highlight the complexity of a woman’s insertion into public administration, although they believe in the possibility of urban change through their participation. Supporting this view, Silvia Federici (2017) argues that the inclusion of women in power structures is part of the refusal of the ‘disciplining of the body’, as historically patriarchy controls cities, and women’s involvement in urban life can be seen as a catalyst for creative initiatives questioning the hegemonic system.

Furthermore, artistic expressions also take place in public spaces, revealing that these urban fabrics are important “places of activism for most social and political movements of the past two centuries” (Kern, 2021, p. 160). The presence of women in these spaces is a way to strengthen social struggles through the dissemination of their debates and also symbolises resistance (Kern, 2021). While reality exposes accumulations of violence, women continue to resist through their artistic work and projects, such as female graffiti artists who use drawing as a tool for expression. Some artists prefer to remain anonymous for safety reasons, but their marks reaffirm the diversity of themes, techniques and styles.

Walking through the streets, it is possible to find graffiti on walls, construction fence, signs, and other surfaces. It becomes a challenge to understand the messages of these interventions within an environment with intense sensory stimuli. Thus, recognising whether a graffiti piece created by a woman is even more complex, because doesn’t exist a pattern. According to Gilles Deleuze (1999), it may be possible to identify if the drawing was made

2 According to the Ajuntament de Barcelona (2024), Poblenou and Provençals del Poblenou are neighborhoods in the district of Sant Martí and are part of the 'traditional Poblenou'.

3 Debates about the legality of graffiti only intensified in the 2000s (Amorim, 2022).

4 Galleries primarily embraced the style through the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring.

by an women artist through their style. For the author, personal style resides in the act of creation, in which the subject understands their experiences and produces a unique and non-transferable style. Therefore, each female graffiti artist has an identity and a style that provides a diversity of colours, themes and materials.

Thus, it can be said that there is no 'universal style of graffiti made by women' and creativity together with the act of drawing has added graphic layers to the landscape and transformed places. According to Henri Lefebvre (2016), inhabiting the city is a negotiation between powers. For this reason, citizens' creativity is a way of appropriating environments, a claim for the right to the city. Artistic action can subvert hegemonic control, especially as "art has resisted the meaning of the work; it offers multiple figures of times and spaces" (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 125). In other words, women can also act collectively in environments and their graffiti reinforces the power of drawing in the constitution of a drawn city.

A graffiti intervention can bring political debates, criticism, greater access to art, playful and popular representations, as well as codes of complex legibility into the public space. However, for the movement, beyond the result in the environment, the act of drawing itself is essential. The process incorporates shared experiences between artists, can create emotional bonds with places, enables communication with society and maintains the collective memory (Halbwachs, 2003) of an urban cultural tradition. These layers may be considered symbolic marks in the city, as even if they are not easily recognisable, they carry the weight of urban history and are part of the landscape.

With this context in mind, authors such as Denis Cosgrove (1989) argue that the construction of cultural and symbolic landscape takes into account the contribution of social groups that also create graphic markings on walls, revealing their varied understandings of urban life—just as happens with graffiti made by women. These artistic manifestations can heighten levels of communication. However, "to understand the expressions written by culture in the landscape we must know the 'language' used: the symbols and meanings alongside the culture" (Cosgrove, 1989, p. 125). Therefore, to deepen knowledge of the urban landscape, it is important to decode the drawings present and analyse the mutability of space.

Understanding the landscape as an envelope in constant formation through graphic elements is also central for Joy Till (2014), who states that "every city is, fundamentally, a human relational environment, a vast medium" (Till, 2014, p. 56). According to the author, the city gives rise to multiple forms of visual communication, enhancing a landscape built upon the layering of graphic productions. Thus, images created by citizens contribute to a graphic landscape and foster the individual's sense of belonging in place.

Considering that female graffiti is another graphic layer in shaping the contemporary city's landscape, one might ask: is it possible to locate graffiti created by women? To investigate this, mapping is used as a tool for research and representation of their presence, which may be expressed in different territories. Therefore, the cartographic methodology should be applied across various cities to reflect the diversity of urban interventions and demonstrate how the act of graffiti by women is a global phenomenon. With the intention of confirming these potentials, the territorial focus is on the neighbourhoods of Santo Cristo in Rio de Janeiro and Poblenou with Provençals del Poblenou in Barcelona.

Urban and Cultural Dialogues between Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona

To speak of the relationship between Rio de Janeiro and graffiti is to speak of the pioneering spirit of certain groups in the 1980s. The city played a significant role in the emergence of the first collectives, such as the FleshBeck Crew, who were influenced by the provocative phrases written by the figure known as Profeta Gentileza⁵ in the port zone. In 2004, Latin America's first all-female graffiti group, TPM Crew, was also formed in Rio (Pabón-Colón, 2018). Since then, the number of female graffiti artists in the city has continued to grow. Their interventions can mainly be found in areas such as the city centre and the port area, particularly in the neighbourhood of Santo Cristo.

Santo Cristo, with approximately 9,936 residents⁶, is one of the foundational areas of the city. It preserves its industrial past, shelters the favelas of Morro da Providência and Morro do Pinto, safeguards historic warehouses

5 José Datrino (1917–1996) became immortalised in the memory of Rio de Janeiro's residents through his panels bearing messages of love and peace.

6 Information obtained by IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística), 2022.

and sheds, and has become a highly sought location for many female graffiti artists. After years of urban transformation, the area is currently marked by urban voids⁷. Due to its strategic location near the sea and the administrative centre of the city, along with institutional political projects such as Porto Maravilha and Porto Maravalley, it has been significantly reshaped by the real estate market since 2024. Construction companies foresee major changes to the landscape, with the planned development of six new residential buildings and the arrival of an estimated 15,000 new residents⁸.

The presence of graffiti in the area can be seen on walls, hoardings and within urban voids. It is believed that female graffiti artists choose these locations due to the relatively low level of policing, allowing them to appropriate the space for an indefinite period. However, as the neighbourhood undergoes transformation and its residents experience the effects, the presence of popular female graffiti in these areas takes on further symbolic layers: the resistance of presence and the preservation of graffiti's contestatory culture.

Like Rio, Barcelona is also a cosmopolitan city with a significant history tied to graffiti. Since the 1980s, symbolic graffiti murals have existed there⁹, though the relationship with the municipal authorities has not always been harmonious. In the 1990s, graffiti was declared illegal. In the 2000s, however, artists' efforts to gain cultural recognition for the movement spurred initiatives to distance it from vandalism, instead valuing urban art more aligned with aesthetic expression than subversion. As a result, legalised spaces for graffiti were inaugurated, such as the park of Les Tres Xemeneies, and the city gained the title of capital of urban art (Bou, 2023).

Nevertheless, spontaneous graffiti continues to appear on ephemeral surfaces, especially in neighbourhoods like Poblenou and Provençals del Poblenou. Located in the district of Sant Martí, the have approximately 34,151 residents¹⁰ and is historically significant for Catalunya's industrial heritage. It also features tourist, artistic and cultural landmarks¹¹ and has been similarly impacted by fast real estate development. Due to its proximity to the beach and the quality of local infrastructure, as well as institutional projects such as Plan 22@¹², the area has attracted property developers, leading to rising housing costs and an increase in urban voids destined for new construction.

Walking through its streets, one can observe a variety of landscapes within the same neighbourhood. There are areas marked by large warehouses, constructions that recall the industrial past, corporate skyscrapers, residential condominiums and ongoing building works. Even so, it is possible to find graffiti by women that asserts their presence and signals places where there is a relative sense of popular dissatisfaction regarding the state of local maintenance and the future of the neighbourhood. These interventions are most visible on the temporary hoardings surrounding vacant plots.

Considering the context of Santo Cristo in Rio de Janeiro and Poblenou with Provençals del Poblenou in Barcelona, it becomes clear that both are significant in the local and international history of graffiti. These areas were selected for the study precisely because they highlight urban voids as spaces desired by female graffiti artists. Despite undergoing radical urban transformations, these neighbourhoods have a vibrant urban life, which confirms the presence of women in the construction of the urban landscape.

In order to carry out the methodological exploration in these areas, a mapping-based methodology was applied. Cartography not only suggests a valorisation of the territory but also becomes a tool for visualising the networks among artists and documenting the process. Moreover, it is a practice that establishes spatial representations of the graphic marks and proposes another dimension of time and graphical depiction of the sites. It can be said

7 The basis regarding urban voids is found in the book "Vazios urbanos: percursos contemporâneos", by Andréa Borde (eds.), 2012.

8 Data obtained from the City of Rio de Janeiro through Invest.Rio, 2024.

9 Such as Keith Haring's mural, "Todos juntos podemos parar el SIDA" (1989), in Barcelona.

10 Data obtained from the Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2024.

11 Key sites include Parc del Centre del Poblenou, La Escocesa, La Torre, among others.

12 An institutional project aimed at transforming the industrial territory into a hub for innovation and technology. Based on "¿Del Manchester Catalán al Soho Barcelonés? La renovación del barrio del Poblenou en Barcelona y la cuestión de la vivienda" by Isaac Marrero Guillamón (2003).

that mapping the landscape also constitutes a way of recording alternative modes of occupying and inhabiting the city from the perspective of female graffiti artists.

Methodological Paths: Studying Graffiti Space Between Walls and Maps

Mappings are laden with interpretations and bring to light realities that were previously invisible or unimaginable. Considering the technological advances in mapping, authors such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2021) regard cartography as a framework that assists in understanding the transformation of things in the world. For the authors, “the map does not reproduce an unconscious closed upon itself; it constructs it. It is part of the rhizome. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions” (Deleuze, G.; Guattari, F.; 2021, p. 30).

With this in mind, mapping is understood as an activity that may be guided by the method of becoming, in a non-linear process of learning-by-doing. The cartographic practice allows for the representation of layers of the contemporary city that are in constant transformation and, throughout its execution, new knowledge is produced. In this sense, this article proposes the creation of a map of graffiti made by women, based on the belief that cartography contributes to better visualisation of the public space where interventions are found and that it can be constantly updated – just as graffiti is created daily.

However, in order to assess whether the proposed methodology contributes to the study of the subject, this article is an exercise in methodological experimentation. With the aim of understanding the impacts of graffiti by women on the urban landscape in different cities, a comparative analysis is conducted between the neighbourhoods of Santo Cristo in Rio de Janeiro and Poblenou with Provençals del Poblenou in Barcelona. Among the procedures are mappings and the creation of a database, organised in five stages.

The initial step is to identify who the female graffiti artists active in these spaces are and to establish contact with them. These artists can often be found within artistic circuits and through their social media profiles, where it is possible to discover names and strengthen connections. The second stage involves visiting the sites of previously identified graffiti interventions. This phase is ideal for exploratory walks, which may begin at a starting point or specific piece of graffiti but are intentionally flexible. Here, the practice of drifting¹³ through the city helps to uncover new places, artists, and works in unfamiliar urban settings, while also constructing a mental map of the territory. During fieldwork, each piece of graffiti should be documented through photographs and notes.

With some graffiti locations recorded, the third stage entails mapping these interventions by women. Regardless of the two territorial case studies, the process proceeds through digital mapping using Google My Maps, which enables swift registration of images and collected data. This platform can also serve as a basis for other visual representations, such as hand-drawn cartographies. Through intentional and critical drawing, it becomes possible to create a map that is not only objective and communicative but also aesthetically engaging – serving as both an analytical tool and a prompt for formulating new questions about public space.

The fourth stage runs parallel to the third and consists of processing the data gathered through mapping. Given the complexity of information associated with each graffiti work, it is essential to develop a database that organises specific details such as authorship, theme, style, date of execution, among others. This stage also offers the opportunity to experiment with visual formats such as diagrams and infographics, which can enhance the readability and accessibility of the data.

The final stage concerns how the research is shared. Most of the dissemination takes place online via social media, inviting diverse audiences to engage in conversations about how female graffiti shapes everyday landscapes. Creating an Instagram profile, for example, allows the project to connect the research, cities, artists and individuals across different locations. Furthermore, documenting interventions in digital format contributes to the preservation of their memory. Nevertheless, this space comes with its own challenges, such as shifting algorithms and uncertain longevity (Lanier, 2018). While acknowledging that such tools are not permanent, they are still employed due to their current relevance.

Given this methodology, the aim is to identify and document the presence of graffiti created by women in urban

13 The Situationist drift, grounded in psychogeography, is an exploratory form of walking that embraces the unexpected in urban contemplation.

public spaces. Applying this investigative framework across different cities may demonstrate its reproducibility and signal that the act of graffiti by women is part of an international phenomenon. One might say that mapping graffiti also offers an opportunity to spatialise the artworks and understand how certain women appropriate spaces through creative and artistic initiatives. Accordingly, this methodology was applied to the two case studies and produced significant results and analyses.

Results

Initially, the identification of female graffiti artists and their styles in the Santo Cristo neighbourhood was conducted through social contact with cultural centres, collectives and art schools. With this foundation, walking through the streets became a routine process of photographic documentation. Following these experiences, digital mapping was carried out, including metadata for each piece of graffiti and some charts were also created. The resulting map, photographs and specific details of the interventions facilitated contact with new artists and led to the discovery of additional graffiti works.

The mapping of Poblenu and Provençals del Poblenu began with a key challenge: how to apply this process in an unfamiliar territory? It was necessary to immerse oneself in and study the local culture, land use and other layers that informed attentive walks. Discovering art schools and cultural centres made it possible to connect with female graffiti artists and enabled the photographic documentation of some of them and their work. For the cartography, an independent file was created in Google My Maps. The process remained similar to that in Rio de Janeiro, but particular emphasis was placed on hand-drawn maps. Beyond offering alternative cartographic representations, these were essential for developing spatial familiarity and for valuing creative psychomotor work.

The execution of the procedures led to the identification of 23 graffiti pieces created by 12 female artists in the Santo Cristo neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, as illustrated in Figure 1. The number of women involved suggests a diversity of agents active in the streets. It can be said that the artists have appropriated underused spaces, construction hoardings and some of the main roads of the area, with one or more interventions each. According to the findings, the majority of the artworks bear signatures — making it easier to identify authorship — and are created on a human scale. Furthermore, in terms of visual content, the themes tend to revolve around playfulness, typography and critical commentary.



Figure 1: Map of graffiti made by women in the Santo Cristo neighbourhood (Rio de Janeiro), 2024. Source: Author's elaboration (2025).

In Poblenu and Provençals del Poblenu, seven graffiti works by seven different female artists were recorded, as



Figure 3: From left to right, graffiti by Lolly in Santo Cristo and work by Tierra de Isis in Poblenou with Provençals del Poblenou, with their locations. Source: Author (2025).

It is important to highlight that squares, playgrounds and skate parks not only convey cultural codes but also emphasise the significance of these spaces for urban life. These social spaces serve as invitations for gathering, contemplation and the creation of socio-spatial bonds. Because of this characteristic, it can be understood that some female graffiti artists feel encouraged to appropriate these environments. Another similarity between the cases is the type of surface on which the graffiti is found. The interventions are predominantly on large obsolete industrial facilities, underutilised and deteriorating buildings, and on metallic temporary fence around construction sites (see Figure 4), consolidating their ephemeral identities.



Figura 4: From left to right, graffiti by Las, Pam and Bia in Santo Cristo, and work by Mida in Poblenou with Provençals del Poblenou, with their locations. Source: Author (2025).

Similarly, it is interesting to point out the bond among the female graffiti artists, which strengthens friendships and fosters international exchange, as they leave their marks in other places with the help of colleagues. Looking at a mural with various graffiti, it is possible to distinguish that some were created at the same time (through use of the same paint or theme), but the artists are recognised by their individual styles. Thus, graffiti is not merely the final product, but rather the social relationships within the process. Observing the case studies, one can say that this global phenomenon is driven by women's search for belonging and their desire to be part of the

urban landscape. Consequently, public spaces with urban voids also become canvases for these interventions, influencing how the artists communicate with the contemporary city.

Conclusion

Bearing in mind the historic social oppressions faced by women, their participation in graffiti highlights struggles for the democratic right to inhabit the city. Since graffiti is based on experimentation and critique of hegemonic power, women have the opportunity to assert their existence in the world through their distinct codes and symbols. The trace left by a female graffiti artist on the street is also the construction of new graphic layers within public space. Thus, documenting the artists and their work contributes to the collective memory of urban culture – the graffiti movement – and to the cultural landscape.

From the methodological essay conducted in the Santo Cristo neighbourhood in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and Poblenou with Provençals del Poblenou in Barcelona (Catalunya, Spain), the rapid advance of the real estate sector in these territories was also evident. Both areas share a relatively deactivated industrial and port past, resulting in deteriorated buildings, urban voids and public spaces with poor maintenance by local authorities. With growing real estate market interest, new developments are underway, with noticeable impacts on rising living costs and landscape transformation. In this context, graffiti signals historically neglected spaces that might become the next real estate targets, becoming a popular code of dissatisfaction towards radical urban transformations.

Furthermore, it is clear that questioning whether graffiti made by women can symbolically transform the landscape is insufficient without considering the spatiality of these interventions. The methodology based on mapping proved helpful in this study. Fieldwork, graphic representations and direct contact with the artists demonstrated how lived experience and cartographic drawing walk hand in hand. It was confirmed that this methodology can be replicated in different cities.

Consequently, the comparative study allowed connections between the two cities and strengthened expressive drawing as a cartographic tool. It identified that urban voids are sought out by female graffiti artists due to low surveillance and the provision of ephemeral surfaces such as hoardings, which offer greater freedom of expression. The presence of similar themes across different contexts also reveals a global phenomenon where women resist and continue to engage in graffiti, connecting local identities through international dialogues. Therefore, graffiti interventions by women add symbolic meaning to public spaces and are part of the construction of the cultural landscape.

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